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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000232

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NEA/ELA
NSC FOR MARCHESE

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [EIND](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: NEW EMBASSY TRAVEL PROCEDURES: VISIT TO HOMES
REF: 06 DAMASCUS 639

CLASSIFIED BY: CDA MICHAEL H. CORBIN FOR REASONS 1.5 B/D

1. (U) SUMMARY. THE SARG HAS MOVED TO FURTHER RESTRICT EMBASSY DAMASCUS, ABILITY TO ENGAGE SYRIANS OUTSIDE OF THE CAPITAL. AS A RESULT, THE EMBASSY HAS ADAPTED ITS TRAVEL PROCEDURES TO ENSURE OFFICERS CONTINUE TO GET OUT OF THE CAPITAL AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE. OUR MOST RECENT TRIP USING OUR NEW TECHNIQUES WAS TO THE CENTRAL INDUSTRIAL CITY OF HOMES. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) THE SARG HAS ALWAYS SCRUTINIZED OUR TRAVEL (REF A), BUT RECENTLY ITS SECURITY SERVICES HAVE WORKED HARDER TO SUBVERT EMBASSY TRAVEL OUTSIDE OF DAMASCUS. POSSIBLY LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR THEIR NEW EFFORT, THE MFA ISSUED A GENTLE DIPNOTE REQUIRING PRIOR MFA NOTIFICATION OF ANY TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL BY FOREIGN DIPLOMATS, ON APRIL 26, 2006. IN NOVEMBER, THE MFA DELIVERED A HARSHER VERSION DIRECTING ALL MISSIONS TO NOTIFY OF ANY TRAVEL. THIS LED TO A PROTEST BY EU AMBASSADORS. LIKE MOST FOREIGN MISSIONS, WE HAVE IGNORED THE DIPLOMATIC NOTES AND HAVE CONTINUED TO TRAVEL WITHOUT NOTIFYING THE MFA. OUR NORMAL METHOD OF TRAVEL HAD BEEN TO HAVE OUR FSN STAFF ARRANGE APPOINTMENTS AND LOGISTICS, AND, AT TIMES, ACCOMPANY THE OFFICER/S ON TRAVEL. STARTING AROUND THE TIME OF THE CONFLICT IN LEBANON LAST SUMMER, THE SARG'S SECURITY SERVICES HAVE SUBVERTED EMBASSY TRAVEL ARRANGED IN THIS WAY BY PRESSURING OUR SYRIAN INTERLOCUTORS TO CANCEL ARRANGED APPOINTMENTS AND BY CALLING IN FOR MULTIPLE SECURITY SERVICES INTERROGATIONS ANY WHO MEET US IN SPITE OF THE WARNINGS. THE SARG'S SECURITY SERVICES HAVE LIKEWISE INTIMIDATED OUR LOCAL STAFF INTO BEING AFRAID TO TRAVEL WITH OFFICERS OR EVEN MAKE ROUTINE TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS. THE AGGRESSIVE SARG ACTIONS HAVE COINCIDED WITH A WIDER SARG CRACKDOWN ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS DOMESTIC OPPOSITION.

3. (C) GIVEN THE NECESSITY FOR TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL FOR OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE POLITICAL/ECONOMIC SITUATION, EMBASSY DAMASCUS STAFF HAVE CONTINUED TO TRAVEL, BUT IN A LESS CONVENTIONAL MANNER. TRAVEL IS STILL OVERT, IN OFFICIAL VEHICLES WITH AN EMBASSY DRIVER FAMILIAR WITH THE AREA, BUT IT IS NOW CONDUCTED WITHOUT PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS. MOST TRAVEL CONSISTS OF DAY TRIPS AS THE SYRIAN SECURITY SERVICES HAVE A PRESENCE IN EVERY HOTEL OR HAVE MADE ARRANGEMENTS WITH THE HOTEL MANAGEMENT TO BE NOTIFIED IMMEDIATELY OF FOREIGN GUESTS ARRIVAL. (NOTE: ONCE A DIPLOMAT CHECKS INTO A HOTEL, THE SECURITY SERVICES FOLLOW THE OFFICER, NORMALLY VERY OVERTLY, AND OFTEN PRESSURE HIS OR HER LOCAL NATIONAL DRIVER TO PROVIDE A FULL ITINERARY OF THE TRIP. ONCE THEY START FOLLOWING US DIPLOMATS, THE SARG SECURITY SERVICES ARE SOMETIMES SO BOLD AS TO ENTER THE OFFICE WHERE US DIPLOMATS

ARE MEETING LOCAL SYRIANS. END NOTE.)

14. (U) OUR MOST RECENT TRIP WAS TO HOMS) AN INDUSTRIAL CITY ROUGHLY IN THE CENTER OF THE COUNTRY, TWO HOURS NORTH OF DAMASCUS. HOMS ITSELF IS NOT A TOURIST DESTINATION AND RECEIVES LESS ATTENTION FROM FOREIGNERS THAN MOST OTHER MAJOR SYRIAN CITIES. THOUGH HEAVILY POLLUTED BY THE PRESENCE ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE CITY OF A PHOSPHATE FACTORY AND ONE OF SYRIA'S TWO REFINERIES, THE CITY ITSELF IS BEING RENOVATED WITH WIDE, NEW BOULEVARDS, AND MANY NEW HOUSING UNITS. SOME ATTRIBUTE THE INCREASE IN PUBLIC SPENDING TO THE FACT THAT HOMS IS THE TRADITIONAL HOME OF SYRIA'S FIRST LADY, ASMA ASAD, WHO COMES FROM A VERY PROMINENT SUNNI FAMILY OF HOMS. THE WESTERN GOODS THAT HAVE BEEN INCREASINGLY FLOWING INTO THE SYRIAN MARKET AS A RESULT OF THE SARG INCREMENTALLY LOOSENING OF IMPORT RESTRICTIONS IN RECENT YEARS, ARE READILY APPARENT IN HOMS, WHERE NEW STORE FRONTS SPORT WESTERN BRAND-NAMES. THERE IS ALSO AN EXPANDING PRESENCE OF TRENDY NEW CAFES, RESTAURANTS, AND HOTELS. IN CONTRAST TO DAMASCUS, WE DID NOT SEE A SINGLE POSTER OF HIZBALLAH LEADER HASSAN NASRALLAH, WHICH REINFORCES A COMMON BELIEF THAT THE PROLIFERATION OF SUCH PARAPHERNALIA IN DAMASCUS MAY PARTLY RESULT FROM REGIME SUPPORTED EFFORTS. ADDITIONALLY, AT FIRST GLANCE AT LEAST, A NOTICEABLY SMALLER PERCENTAGE OF THE WOMEN WERE WEARING THE HIJAB IN HOMS THEN IN DAMASCUS.

15. (C) BUSINESSMEN WE HAPPENED TO MEET, (CONTACTS IN DAMASCUS HAD GIVEN US NAMES AND NUMBERS FOR FRIENDS IN HOMS), ALL HAD EXPANSION PLANS FOR EITHER EXISTING FACTORIES OR WERE BUILDING NEW ONES. MANY WERE TARGETTING EXPORTS TO SYRIA'S NEIGHBORS, ESPECIALLY IRAQ, TURKEY, AND JORDON - AS WELL AS THE GULF - AND CITED HOMS' CENTRAL POSITION BETWEEN SYRIA'S PORTS AND ITS NEIGHBORS AS THE KEY FACTOR DRIVING THE EXPANSION OF THE NEW INDUSTRIAL CITY IN THE SOUTHERN SUBURBS OF HOMS. ONE INDUSTRIALIST COMMENTED TO US THAT MANY OF HIS

PEERS COUNTED ON CONTINUED INSTABILITY IN IRAQ TO FORCE RETAILERS THERE TO SOURCE THEIR PRODUCTS INCREASINGLY FROM SYRIA. THOUGH HE EXPORTED TO IRAQ, HE DISCOUNTED THE IMPORTANCE OF THE IRAQI MARKET IN HIS OWN DECISION TO DOUBLE HIS FACTORY'S SIZE AND INSTEAD CITED RISING DOMESTIC DEMAND AND THE NEED TO KEEP UP WITH COMPETITORS AS DRIVING THE HOMS FACTORY CONSTRUCTION.

16. (C) COMMENT. DESPITE THE SARG'S BEST EFFORTS TO BRAND THE U.S. EMBASSY AS AN ENEMY AND ANYONE MEETING U.S. DIPLOMATS AS COLLABORATORS, THE AVERAGE SYRIAN REMAINS VERY OPEN TO AMERICANS. MANY BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CAPITOL HAVE FRIENDS OR RELATIVES IN THE U.S., READILY CONSUME U.S. POP CULTURE, AND ARE HAPPY TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO MEET AND EXCHANGE PERSPECTIVES WITH AN AMERICAN. TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL REMAINS BOTH POSSIBLE AND IMPORTANT FOR OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IS HAPPENING IN SYRIA TODAY. WE WILL CONTINUE TO TAKE EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO CHECK THE PULSE OF SYRIA OUTSIDE OF DAMASCUS.
CORBIN